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Farmers divided after expert issues glyphosate warning

Posted Mar. 7th, 2014 by [Barb Glen2 Comments](#)

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Harmful effects American plant pathologist Don Huber links glyphosate use with rise in human birth defects

Farmer opinions ran the spectrum Feb. 27 following a presentation by Purdue professor emeritus Don Huber about the repercussions of glyphosate use.

“It’s all true,” said agronomy adviser Hendrik Feenstra after hearing Huber’s speech to the Farming Smarter research group annual meeting in Lethbridge.

Others were not as accepting.

“I think Dr. Huber’s presentation was good when he stuck to peer reviewed sources,” said farmer Andy Kirschenman.

However, he said the correlations Huber made between increased glyphosate use and a rise in human birth defects, which the professor argued coincided with increased chemical use on genetically modified crops, raised questions.

“Acceptance of genetically modified crops as well as glyphosate is not the only thing that started in the mid ’90s,” said Kirschenman.

That said, the farmer from Hilda, Alta., has reduced use of glyphosate on his farm in recent years.

“I have already started to cut back on glyphosate,” he said.

“I think it’s irresponsible to use it from a resistance management thing. We’ve seen within the last two years glyphosate resistant kochia start, so that’s definitely an issue, as well as other resistance. I think that we use too much of it.”

Huber said glyphosate is implicated in reduced crop yields and increased incidence of more than 40 plant diseases. It is a broad spectrum chelator that prevents plants from adequate mineral uptake.

It is also an antibiotic, which destroys beneficial soil bacteria.

“Glyphosate targets all of the good guys,” said Huber.

“You’re changing that biology very dramatically.”

The plant pathologist said glyphosate renders plants susceptible to soil-borne pathogens and attributes the increase in Goss’s wilt in corn and sudden death syndrome in soybeans to glyphosate use on GM varieties of those crops.

Alberta Agriculture agronomy researcher Ross McKenzie pressed Huber to explain why prairie farmers have not seen yield reductions on glyphosate resistant crops.

Huber attributed it to the strength of traditional crop breeding programs.

“We should move away from it as quickly as we can,” he said of glyphosate.

Huber’s warnings about the chemical prompted a U.S. Department of Agriculture review on glyphosate effects, which was released two years ago.

The report’s authors concluded that “reports of significant adverse effects of glyphosate on mineral nutrition and diseases of GR (glyphosate resistant) crops are perplexing in light of the considerable body of literature and yield data that contradict such claims. Nevertheless, there might be effects of glyphosate in GR crops on mineral nutrition and/or disease under particular but uncommon conditions.”

Further studies are now underway on high levels of glyphosate applied to Roundup Ready corn and soybeans.

Huber said in his presentation that more than 1,300 peer-reviewed papers have been written on feed and food safety issues involving glyphosate and GM proteins. Most of them indicate concerns.

However, use of the chemical is rampant and unlikely to cease.

“Ninety-four percent of our farms use glyphosate, so make sure you recognize that there’s a reduced nutrient efficiency and compensate for it,” said Huber.

“We need to compensate for those needs and realize that you can’t do one thing in this ecology without affecting all of the other interactions. Look at it in that aspect.”

Kirschenman said extensive use of glyphosate for weed control and desiccant has eliminated equally effective alternatives,.

“There’s really no other option,” he said.

“There’s no possible way I will go back to tillage as a weed control option because if we’re talking about destroying beneficial soil bacteria and microbes, tillage is going to be much worse than glyphosate in my area, plus soil loss and erosion.”